

Governor's Committee Annual Awards Ceremony
October 25, 2001 Sheraton Anchorage Hotel



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There was a Captain on a large ship and as he sat in his chamber, one of his sailors came down to him and said: "Sir, there is a light up ahead." The Captain said: "Well, is it coming straight at us or off to the side?" "Well", the sailor replied, "it's coming straight at us." "Then we must be on a direct collision course with another ship," said the Captain. "Signal them that they must change their

course by 20 degrees." The sailor ran off and did as he was told. He returned and said: "Sir, they signaled to us; 'change OUR course by 20 degrees.'" Well, the Captain was a little bit disturbed by this and he said: "tell them that I am a CAPTAIN and I COMMAND that they change their course by 20 degrees." The sailor ran off and did as he was told. He returned with their message: "I am a SEAMAN SECOND CLASS and I still suggest you change your course by 20 degrees." Well, by this time the Captain was mad; he was very mad, and he said, "You tell them I am a BATTLESHIP and I DEMAND that they change their course by 20 degrees." Well, the sailor ran off and did as he was told. Then he came back and he sat there silently as the Captain demanded: "So, are they changing their course?" And the sailor replied: "Sir", they said, "I am a LIGHT HOUSE and I still recommend you change *your* course by 20 degrees."

I use that story because it tells a lot about what people with disabilities and myself have had to do. Many times we have to change our course by 20 degrees, and we have to learn things that are different. Now it seems a little bit incongruous that I'm *from* Hawaii and I'm *in* Alaska. But, the truth of the matter is, I spend a large amount of time doing Arctic research and people ask me about that. And I say, "Well, it's very simple. You can go away for eight weeks, go someplace cold, study what you want to and then you come back to Hawaii. That seems like a very nice life to me."

So I've chosen to follow that. But, I found that in doing so I've had to change my course many times by 20 degrees. There have been certain things in life that have helped me, and there have been many lessons that I've taken from this. I found that there have been many things that in my life have helped me, and at times they didn't seem like much help. One of the things I learned is that in life there comes pain. And pain has many lessons that it can provide you.

It wasn't long ago that a friend of mine came to my house on a Sunday to take me to work. He was going to help me work on a proposal that day. You see, I have a van with

Governor's Committee Annual Awards Ceremony
October 25, 2001 Sheraton Anchorage Hotel

a lift in it and he was going to drive me into my office. So we loaded up from my house and drove into the university. We parked in the lot and he began to unload me. Well, he let the lift down. And, as the lift lip came down (it's about three feet off the ground) he pushed me onto the lift and then hit the button to lower it. I'm not sure exactly what happened next. But, I could tell by the fast approaching asphalt that I was soon going to learn a different meaning of "it's time to hit the road." Well, I did a nosedive into the asphalt. Being paralyzed from the neck down, I wasn't able to catch myself. So, I can remember the stars coming up in my eyes, and I can still tell to this day that I can remember the sound of the gravel grinding into my face as I turned over onto the ground.

My friend, by this time, was as shaken up as I was. He came over to me and said, "Are you okay, Richard?" I said, "I'm not sure." I could tell by the warm liquid coming down my face and the red around me that I may have been injured. Well, he took the wheelchair off of me, moved it over to the side and made me as comfortable as he could and went to call 911. As he left, some of my other friends came around, and they too wanted to see how I was doing. It's strange how your mind works at times like that, because all I could remember was that people look a lot different when you're laying flat on your back looking up at them from a parking lot. And I still remember everyone's face.

Soon the ambulance had arrived. The paramedics jumped out of the ambulance and came to my side. They quickly went about to see if I was okay and the first thing they asked me was, "Can you move?" I was a little bit taken aback by this question. You see, they hadn't seen the wheelchair over to the side. And I said, "No, but I couldn't move before." Maybe I was lucky. Maybe something had all of a sudden gotten fixed.

In any type of injury like this where they think something else may be wrong, what they do is they strap you to this board, basically to keep your spine straight, and it's not a very comfortable situation. Well, they strapped me in with a neck brace and all the other trappings that go along with this. I may have been in shock; I'm not quite sure what I was thinking at the time. But, through my mind I was thinking that I've never been in an ambulance before. This could be fun. The idea of going through cars, sirens blaring, going through red lights appealed to the adventurous side of me. When you're strapped to a board, the only thing you see as you're going through traffic is the top of the ambulance. Well, we soon arrived at the emergency room and they took me out and they went through a whole series of x-rays and tests. And while they were doing all these tests they keep you strapped to this board.

This whole ordeal took almost three hours, during which time I was strapped to a board in an emergency room with blankets pulled around me. Now it turned out very nicely that the only thing I had wrong was extreme contusions on my face and I had strained my neck. But, I can tell you this: if you ever want to think about things and learn to do the things and move forward, strap yourself to a board and stare at the ceiling for three hours. Because during that time I was able to come up with an idea that I later wrote up for a grant to the National Science Foundation for a quarter of a million dollars. And I tell

Governor's Committee Annual Awards Ceremony
October 25, 2001 Sheraton Anchorage Hotel

people this because, you see, life comes with pain. None of us are ever going to get out of life without some pain. But pain can teach you things. Pain can actually be a help at times. And pain, when we work through it, can actually be to our benefit. Now I've had many other dealings with pain, and there are many times when I want to get rid of pain. But pain comes with life, and with life there is always adventure. With life there is also a possibility of doing more, and that's what I like about pain. Pain teaches you many things. But there are other things that have taught me many things too. Most of which has probably been frustration. Now I don't know about you, but I consider myself The King of Frustration. You have no idea how many times I'm frustrated. You have no idea how many times my wife gets frustrated. I know how to open the hood of the car, and as I'm trying to explain it to her, she doesn't quite understand how I want it done ... how I want things done, and I also know that I could do things better than anybody else. So of course we should do it my way, which adds to the frustration. But frustration teaches you many things, and frustration can also be of value.

I'd like to share a story with you, because at one time I was honored enough to receive funding from the National Geographic Foundation. I was going to be studying giant clams and this was something I dreamed of all my life. This was something I thought I was going to have to give up on when I was paralyzed. Well, in American Samoa, things are not up to the standards that you might think of with the A.D.A., but they have a couple of advantages. They have Samoans. Now if you have any doubt about Samoans, there was a long flight of stairs. And as we came to the bottom looking up at the stairs thinking that maybe we won't go to this restaurant, a young man came up to our side and said, "You want to go to the restaurant? I'll take you up." And I thought he was going to help us in the wheelchair. No, he picked me up like a babe in his arms and walked up the steps. Now this is not an easy thing, because you see, I'm 6' 4" and weigh probably close to 210 pounds. So, to do this I thought was quite a feat.

Well, to go study the giant clams we had to first get on a small boat. On the dock we were fairly level so it was easy for him to carry me on. After about 24 hours we finally arrived. Now that's something of my dreams. It's a beautiful place. It's totally pristine. There are no people. There is one little small island of about seven acres. We unloaded our boat. We got everything ready and we were there on shore and set up our camp. Well, as you sat there in camp you realized that this is something that you thought was only in movies, because you see, it's the only land for miles around. As you are there and you see the thousands upon thousands of birds that come to the little part of the land to lay their eggs and also to rest. Well, they fly around this island and they rise above it like smoke from a chimney, and it's such a beautiful sight. But it also teaches you a few other things. When you get on the island, the first thing you realize is Rule Number 1: you never look up; Rule Number 2: when you eat your meal, you try to lean over your plate as far as you can, because if something wet hits you in the back of your head at least you know where it is. When it hits your plate of beans, you're not quite sure which is which.

Well, after setting up camp and getting ready, the next day we went off to do our work. We were doing population dynamics. We were doing a survey of the giant clams on

Governor's Committee Annual Awards Ceremony
October 25, 2001 Sheraton Anchorage Hotel

Rosenthal. Well, to do so we would go on the boat and go scuba diving. 'Yeah, I go scuba diving ... it's a wonderful feat.' Sometimes I have to think about why I do it at times. Because when I'm on the side of the boat (and I still remember that they have my legs over the side) they had my tank and my gear on, my heart is racing (it races every time) and I'm talking to myself ... I do this often. I say, "Radtke! Let me get this straight. You can't move your arms, you can't move your feet, and you're going to be diving into 40 feet of water." But, before I can answer myself they would shove me into the water.

Well, the water is a wonderful thing. You're weightless, almost weightless in water, and it also affords you a view of something that you could only dream of at times. Now the visibility at Rosenthal was over 80 feet, and if any of you have ever been scuba diving, visibility at 80 feet is heaven. You see everything. It's in a blue haze as they come into your view, and you do different things that you want to do. Well, the way we do our research is we go down, view over the areas, go back up to the top, discuss exactly what I would like them to do. We would go back down and then we would do our surveys.

Well, this was going on for a whole day, and I found my level of frustration was getting higher and higher, because you see, I remembered how I used to do things and that's how I wanted them to be. I wanted to move on my own, and under water you can't even tell them. Now people will tell you that I can curse with my eyes, and maybe I can, but still you can't tell much more about where you want to go. By the end of the day my level of frustration was at the highest it had ever been, and I remember they sat me over on the rocks as they were cleaning the gear. I was watching the sun go down and I started crying, because you see, I was talking to myself and I said, "Radtke, why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to yourself? You don't have to go through this any more. You don't have to do these things." And then it came to me, "Oh, no." I wasn't doing this for science. It wasn't all for altruistic reasons. The reason I was doing it was for *me*. And, if I was to continue doing this for *me*, I better figure out a way to do it and handle all the different frustrations that come with it. From that day on, we went forth and we did our research. Now I would be lying to you today if I said I don't get frustrated. I get frustrated every morning. I get frustrated every night. But, I learned that frustration has taught me that I can still do the things I want to do. And I still have to have a little more patience. Maybe it's helped me with my students, but those teachings have helped me a lot in learning how I should approach life.

The third thing that's a very big part of teaching me how to do things has been heartache. We've all had our chances for heart ache. What I'd like you to do is come back with me when I was 25 years old. Because you see, when I was 25 years old I had just finished about four years earlier a good career playing football. I was a defensive end; I was 6' 4" and weighed 245 pounds. I was used to tackling quarterbacks ... something that I still can't explain to my wife today ... the feeling of blindsiding a quarterback. There is no other feeling in this world. Well, at that time when I was 25 years old, things looked great, I had a sunshine yellow Jeep. Within a year I was going to finish my Ph.D. I had a post-doctorate lined up in Canada. And, I had my hair.

Governor's Committee Annual Awards Ceremony
October 25, 2001 Sheraton Anchorage Hotel

But, I didn't know at that time that two years later I'd be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I didn't know two years after that I would be in a wheelchair. And, I didn't know that three years after that I'd be what was called a "quadriplegic" ... unable to move from the neck down. I didn't know three years after that that a woman I had married and hoped to share my entire life with was leaving me because, as she had said, 'life hadn't turned out the way she thought it would.' Before she left, she had a few choice words she told me. She said: "You'll never be married again, because after all, who wants to marry a quadriplegic? You won't have any children because your son is going with me. Your career is over because you won't have me here any more to support you and watch you doing your career. And your health is going down and soon you're going to be in a nursing home."

Well, for the first time in my life I was really scared. I was terrified, because you see, I thought what she told me was true. I thought my life was over. I remember quite soon after that lying in my bed looking at the ceiling crying to myself wondering where all that promise had gone; where had all that promise from when I was 25 years old gone? Where was all that when I had the world in the palm of my hands, where did it go, why was my life over? And as I saw myself, I don't know where it came from, but there was this voice. And this voice came up and it said, "DREAM, DAMN IT, DREAM." So, I dreamed not the dream of sleep, but the dream of when you're awake and how you want things to be. And I dreamed, I dreamed, I dreamed that I would have a wife, that I would have another child, a girl, and I was going to name her "Ocean." I dreamed my career would take me to places that I hadn't even thought of. And I dreamed that my life was going to be fulfilling.

That was ten years ago, and what I wanted. One of the messages I want to give tonight is that *dreams do come true*, because you see; I'm married now for almost nine years. I have the most wonderful wife I know, and we have a daughter, seven years old, and you guessed it, her name is "Ocean." And I've seen my career go places that I hadn't even thought of. I've been honored by the White House. I've been sniffed by bomb sniffing dogs. I've seen places and been places and done things that I hadn't even thought I could do when I was a child. And my life is far from being over. I've learned that dreams do come true, that life has its pain, life has its frustrations, and life has its heartaches. But life also has its dreams, and dreams are what make it worthwhile.

Now there are many mornings when I wake up and as I'm being pulled from my bed and I'm being stretched and I'm being clothed and I'm being bathed and gotten ready for the day, that I'm tired and exhausted and I just want to give up. This is too hard for me. This is too much for what I want to do. But every time that happens, there seems to be a small little voice that comes forth and says, "DREAM, DAMN IT, DREAM," and so I shall.

Thank you.